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SISTERS IN STEEL: WHERE THE WOMEN WERE DURING PITTSBURGH'S
DEINDUSTRIALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Unions play a pivotal role in the development of the labor movement in America. Women are the driving force behind the movement and rarely have their stories told in the male dominated environment that unions mostly cater. Women have made their way into the unions and workforce because of increased economic need to be able to support families and continue a certain lifestyle. Specifically within the mills, women have had a difficult time finding their place in the traditional male environment. In Pittsburgh, women have worked their way into the Steel Mills and made their presence known by fighting for workers' rights and equal treatment. The closing of the mills hit the women especially hard, and the layoffs made it almost impossible to support families. Women have always been in the picture, but rarely discussed to any extent.

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Introduction

Though their role in the home has been a primary focus of television, movies, and political rhetoric, even today, women's work roles historically remain excluded from popular discussions of women's lives. Women have always been the background characters until the last several decades where academics have begun to study the impact that women have had. Susan Armitage describes the male dominated story as "Hisland" where women are "hazy supporting figures far in the background, stoically oppressed or angelically supportive, and certainly voiceless and passive."¹ Women have always been in the background, but it is time to acknowledge the work and hardships they have endured.

Working class women in Pittsburgh have a unique history when attempting to find work, because of the prevalence of mills built in the city. There were many times that women were excluded from this area of work solely because of their sex. This refers back to jobs that became socially acceptable for men and women to have. Every person is thought to fit into a certain stereotype of what it means to be masculine or feminine, but it is not always that black or white. Sonya Rose explains that these ideas "do not reflect what real people actually do or are as women and men."² The majority of people do not fit into the roles that seem to be so clearly defined by society, and that is demonstrated by the women who broke the molds to work outside of the home and in the non-traditional jobs in that male dominated world.

¹ Margaret D. Jacobs, "Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women's History," *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (2010): 558.

² Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 11.

Unions played a key role within the labor movement that has helped form our modern world. Women in these unions have had to make a name for themselves to be recognized as a driving force in the industrial world. Women have always been at the intersection of patriarchy social class and have fought to have their concerns seen as an important matter. In most cases, women were silenced and told that they should go back into their socially constructed boxes and to not worry themselves with things that men deal with. This was not accepted in Pittsburgh, especially throughout the twentieth century.

Women in Pittsburgh worked in the mills and factories throughout the Second World War, but became almost invisible in the workforce until the 1970s. Those who did work were in the stereotypically feminine jobs and were few and far between. The women who made the reappearance in the workforce were able to give another perspective to the unions in the mills while they were fighting to improve the conditions in which they worked. Some women became more involved than others did within their unions, but they all fought to have their rights and concerns recognized by not only their unions, but also the places they worked.

Chapter 1

Pittsburgh History and the Labor Movement

Pittsburgh is a place that is well known for the factories and influence of unions over workers and companies. The city was originally nicknamed the Iron City in the late nineteenth century for its mass production of iron, but was soon renamed the Steel City in 1903 by *Harpers Weekly*, a name that still holds to this day.³ With this transition from iron to steel, many changes occurred in the valley that left a lasting impact on the way those who call it home live their lives.

The skill level of jobs that were held in these industries decreased greatly with the introduction of the steel mills. Those who were part of the ironworkers were highly skilled and had a sense of pride in their work that was no longer felt in the mills where routine tasks and meager wages ruled with lower status jobs. The skill level diminished within the mills as machinery was becoming increasingly available, allowing workers to more efficiently produce material. While the machines changed the way that mills were run, an incredible amount of strain was still put on the bodies of those who worked with them. The repetition and pace that was needed to keep in time with the machines caused extreme exhaustion of the workers, while accidents caused by the machines brought about a new kind of work environment.⁴

Pittsburgh would not have been the industrial hub known around the world had it not been for the iron and steel industries. Between 1880 and 1900, the economy of Pittsburgh was

³ Edward Slavishak, *Bodies of Work: Civic Display and Labor in Industrial Pittsburgh* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 17-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

made more active by the amount of mills that were built in the city by Andrew Carnegie and other steel companies. The changing of the mills is important, but the role of the workers needs to be noted. Unions were created in Pittsburgh during this time, and members made their issues with the workplace known to the owners of the industries.

Pittsburgh's most famous strike led the Battle of Homestead, which had a lasting effect on the working class in the city and the country. These men showed how important their traditional views of their families were to them by joining the fight to protect their jobs. This battle was important because it was the first appearance of the power of workers when standing together, and is still remembered by unions in the city. While it is impossible to do justice to the story of the battle, a background is needed to begin to understand the impact it had. During the summer of 1892, in an effort to save money, the Carnegie Steel Company lowered the minimum wage of their "tonnage men" who were members of the Amalgamated Association of Iron Steel Workers (AAISW).⁵ When the workers refused accept the cut to their wages, Henry Frick, the chief of operations, locked the workers out of the steel mill in an attempt to break the members of the union.⁶ The fight between the company and the workers ended on the morning of 6 July 1892 when employees of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency arrived by barge at the mill on the Monongahela River. Shots were fired and the battle ensued for the remainder of the day until the Pinkertons later surrendered.⁷

This was the fight heard 'round the labor world. The battle showed many industrial owners that their workers are capable of doing something at the same radical level as the people

⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁶ Ibid., 67-68.

⁷ Ibid., 79.

of homestead. Workers were also able to see the effect that coming together had on the fight for better conditions and higher pay. The Battle of Homestead set an example of the extreme measures workers would take to protect their families' wellbeing as well as their own.

The steelworkers became a unique social class that in Marxist terms had “no means of subsistence other than the sale of its labor-power” and would be considered the proletariat.⁸ The social group that is in charge of the company or the so-called means of production is a group that is socially superior and called the bourgeoisie, those who hold the “concentration of the means of production in monopoly form.”⁹ This group would include Frick, and every owner of the steel mills that were created in Pittsburgh at that time. They had a hold over the workers and controlled the amount of steel that was being produced and sold into the market.

Many things have changed in the labor movement since the since the Battle of Homestead, and according to Staughton Lynd, a well-known lawyer, labor activist and historian, one main reason the modern labor movement is close to dying is the lack of female labor activists in the mainstream labor movement. Men and the “masculine values of fighting, dominating, and ranking people one above another” have ruled it.¹⁰ This killed the effort and has made it unable to move forward and by excluding minority groups, the movement has hurt itself and hindered advancement and its ability to grow. Not long after the battle, women began to make an appearance in the industrial workforce, even if they did not immediately take part within the labor movement.

⁸ Ernest Mandel, *An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory* (New York: Path Finder, 1973), 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 204.

Chapter 2

Early Women in the Labor Movement

There is a common misconception in history that women entered the workforce in the early 20th century and did not work before that time. Women have always worked, as household responsibilities also had economic value whether it was recognized or not. As women began to work outside of the home and join the workforce in factories, many began to worry about competition from women who were “taking” their jobs making it impossible for a man to be able to provide for their family.¹¹ The treasurer of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was quoted in 1905 saying that the main value they were fighting for was to not take “the women from their homes to put them in the factory and sweatshops.”¹² Another member of the AFL was quoted saying, “the man should be provided with a fair wage in order to keep his female relatives from going to work.”¹³ This “fair wage” would be enough to support the man’s entire family and allow the woman to not work. These men were terrified that women would take their jobs, and hinder any chances of them gaining a better work environment or more wages to better their standard of living.¹⁴

¹¹ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 26.

¹² Ibid 26

¹³ Ibid 27

¹⁴ While it is common to think of a golden age in which women did not work, women’s traditional responsibilities had tremendous economic value in the centuries prior to the transition to industrial capitalism. In the early phases of industrialization, women took their traditional skills to factories, where their textile expertise helped fuel the industrial revolution. Berg, Maxine. "What Difference Did Women's Work to the Industrial Revolution?" *History Workshop Journal* 35, no. 1 (1993): 22-44.

The common discourse of the time included the effect unforgiving work conditions and meager wages had on the body, soul, and morality of working women. Many debates occurred between the working men and industry owners (but not women) about the effects that working had on women and their families, to the point legislation was discussed in order to “protect” them. Many feared that working in the harsh conditions of factories “endangered the health of unborn children” meanwhile working mothers were also forced to leave their children alone all day long and were not able to properly care for them.¹⁵ The legislation that was put into place acknowledged that a woman’s place in the workforce was starting to change drastically while it also tried to control the social roles of women. The laws were created knowing that women had two different jobs within society, and one had to be limited if the other was to be performed at its best. The ideology of proper gender roles was reinforced by this legislation and produced a divide in workplaces along gender lines to keep women limited in the labor force and safely at home taking care of their families.¹⁶ This movement was an international effort to create legislation that was not only to “protect” women but to also protect the sanctity of family and the “values” that would be instilled upon children by having a mother who remained at home with them.

The majority of the population closely followed these ideas about proper gender roles for men and women. These gender lines were then created, which harmed both men and women who were attempting to make a better life for them and their family. All through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, the ideology of domesticity created a sense of class-consciousness between women of the upper and lower classes, and had harsh consequences for

¹⁵ Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History*, 108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

any of the women who were not able to meet these expectations. To become a “lady” women wore elegant dresses, had servants, and made no economic contribution to the household, which then excluded women who were forced to be a part of the labor force for the survival of their families that in turn brought down their social status.¹⁷ In reality, this domestic life was a standard set by the upper class and became unreachable for the majority of women who worked to maintain a basic lifestyle for their families.

There were some women in Pittsburgh who fit this domestic life where they stayed at home to cook, clean, and take care of the family. Helen Havrilla explains in *Talking Steel Towns* how she would clean the house and take care of her husband whenever he came home from the mill and cook him foods like her mother-in-law because she “had to make all the foods he had had at home.”¹⁸ She was also able to do volunteer work at the cafeteria at her children’s school and the church that she attended.¹⁹ While some women were like Helen and worked at home, others were like Julia Hrika who also was the wife of a steel mill worker, but part of her routine was walking for miles, crossing a bridge over the river and up a three-mile hill to clean for an attorney’s family.²⁰ The role of the women in the household was dependent on the family’s earnings and lifestyle. Some were able to only do household work, while others were forced to also work outside the home, including domestic work and certain jobs within the factories where women attempted to join the unions.

Within unions specifically, men’s view of women in the workforce can be seen as

¹⁷ Ibid., 103. Ironically, even “ladies” had essential economic roles from running household accounts to hiring and firing servants and workers.

¹⁸ Ellie Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns: The Men and Women of America’s Steel Valley* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2007), 66.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

unfavorable as far back to the early nineteenth century. The president of the Philadelphia Trades Association argued “The less you do, the more there will be for the men to do... you will be what you ought to be, free from the performance of that kind of labor which was designed for man alone to perform.”²¹ Women were not always welcomed within the unions because men blamed them for driving down the wages of hard-working men who needed the income to be able to have enough to support their families. Many women did not try to join a union because they saw their role within the work force as temporary, and because of this, did not feel they should join the fight for better work.²² They were not going to be in their jobs for a substantial amount of time since their goal was to eventually fulfill the ideal life of domesticity, and because of this, they would not have any incentive to become part of a union and to make the workforce stronger. Women who attempted to create their own union were forced to fight a different battle beyond gaining new members. An attitude that was held by some men was to isolate the women from the male workforce by denying the women’s union admission into their parent body to become an official union.²³ This happened countless times, like in 1910 when women candy makers attempted to join the Confectionery Workers International Union and was stalled until the employers dismissed the leaders of the group and the union fell apart.²⁴ These women were unable to do anything for themselves because of the parent unions, which were run by men, disapproved of women being part of the workforce. Even though it was unpopular, women becoming part of unions did prove there was an increased interest to be a part of the workforce indefinitely.

²¹ Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History*, 104.

²² *Ibid.*, 105.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 28.

Winning entrance to a union did not guarantee acknowledgment, and they did not access to the same rights and representation within the union as their male counterparts. The men within the union often attempted to sabotage their female compatriots. Men held meetings in saloons, scheduled them at late hours so women would not be able to attend, and ridiculed women who spoke out on issues during the meetings.²⁵ These women were kept from truly being a part of the union and fully participating in the decision making of the group.

Since women were excluded from union workings and fed the idea that their labor in factories was only going to be temporary, they started to look for work outside of that job market. These professions became part of the “non-sex-stereotyped sectors of the labor market” and included jobs that were in the white-collar area like secretarial and clerical work.²⁶ Many women felt that this was a better way to work, rather than the factories and unions where strict gender lines were drawn and often difficult to cross. These women were given vocational education that prepared them for jobs in the office, teaching and social work. Women justified this switch in employment, as it was easier to become married, create a family and have the “perfect” life.²⁷

The nineteenth century was a time when women were trying to find their role within society and understand the most valuable way to contribute to their family. This was the beginning of an extreme socio-economic shift where women were beginning to step into the workforce because their current work was beginning to lose the value that it once held.

²⁵ Ibid., 30.

²⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁷ Ibid., 37.

Chapter 3

Modern Women in Unions

The number of women who took part in the workforce grew steadily from the 1950s on, and during the 1970s women made up at least half of the US labor force.²⁸ This is an incredible jump from the beginning of the 20th century where women were struggling to be considered for a job that was outside of the household. Women were beginning to work in the public sphere because the cost of living was going up and there was no increase in the wages to accommodate growing inflation combined with the increased aspiration of women to leave the house.²⁹ It was becoming impossible to support a family and maintain a middle-class lifestyle on one paycheck much like today. To be able to live an “ideal” middle class lifestyle the family is accustomed to, both parents are usually needed to work to pay for the increasingly materialistic way of life. This diversifying workforce was the beginning of a change about which many were not particularly happy. Several issues came about when women started joining the unions and fighting for equal treatment among the men they were working with on a daily basis.

Women started finding their place within the unions during World War II as they began working the jobs that were left by the men who went to fight. The line that separated men and women’s jobs shifted temporarily during this time as the women moved into areas that men had left, and then moved backward again after the war was finally over and the veterans returned to

²⁸ John P. Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came: The Decline on the American Steel Industry* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

reclaim their jobs.³⁰ Grace Panigal was the second woman hired at Latrobe Steel Company during the war in January of 1942, not long after Pearl Harbor.³¹ Originally, she did not join the union, but when more women were hired at the mill to cover the men's jobs, the United Steel Workers insisted that the women were included. Panigal explains in an interview "They had women sign a contract... saying that they would belong to the union and that their jobs would be terminated within six months after the end of the war."³² This was done to guarantee men their jobs back once they returned from fighting.

After the war, the numbers of women who were in the workforce and in industrial unions dropped drastically, but by 1956 three and a half million women were in the unions, representing 18 percent of all union members, doubling numbers from 1940.³³ Women began to find that their work was needed in the field and they would be able to gain more power in numbers. Between 1946 and 1958, women made up close to 40 percent of workers within the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), a sizable increase of their numbers before the war.³⁴ The amount of women continued to increase after the war and made another jump in the 1970s when more than one income became necessary to sustain middle class lifestyles.

The unions that women have become part of have dramatically affected their treatment in

³⁰ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 16.

³¹ "Grace Panigal," interview by J.C. in *Out of the Kitchen* Frances Murphy Zauhar, Richard David Wissolik, Jennifer Campion, Barbara J. Wissolik, and Saint Vincent College Center for Northern Appalachian Studies, 1995, *Out of the Kitchen: Women in the Armed Services and on the Homefront : The Oral Histories of Pennsylvania Veterans, World War II*. Rev. ed. Vol. 4.;no. 4;. Latrobe, PA: Saint Vincent College Center for Northern Appalachian Studies, 108.

³² *Ibid.*, 108.

³³ Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

the workplace. Once women were finally a visible presence and created a place for themselves within the unions, they were able to fight for things that directly affected their lives and performance in the workplace. Some of these things consisted of parental leave, childcare, alternative work schedules, sexual harassment, and health, something in which women felt had an impact on how they were able to work and were concerns that men found less important.

Parental leave is something that was incredibly significant for the union women to fight for. It allowed a parent the right to be able to take leave with the birth or adoption of a child and be able to return to work without the loss of seniority and wage rate, even though most of these leaves were unpaid.³⁵ This was something that was crucial for women who were in the workforce. Without parental leave, there would be no possible way that they would be able to keep their jobs. If a women had to take a leave, employers replaced them, so eventually earning the right to maternal leave on a national level in 1993 allowed them to be able to return to work without worry of losing their seniority or dropping on the pay scale just to take care of their family members, which is something society has always told them was their job to do.³⁶

Child Care is another issue that women fought for within the unions. Every contract is different, but some agreements gave affordable daycare where the parents work or somewhere near by, and others subsidize childcare expenses.³⁷ Without childcare, many women would not consider holding a job. If childcare is too expensive, many families have one parent stay home instead of working and the entire paycheck going to daycare, which happens quite often. Without childcare being an option, many people rely on friends or extended families to watch their child

³⁵ Michael D. Yates, *Why Unions Matter* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 165.

³⁶ Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis, eds, *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880-1920*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 337.

³⁷ Yates, *Why Unions Matter*, 165.

until they are able to come home from work.

The Working Women's 1980 Platform, published by major organizations in the fight for women's right to work—the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Displaced Homemakers Network, Wider Opportunities for Women, and the National Commission on Working Women—addressed the issue of childcare. The platform was presented in order to send a message to the presidential candidates at the time to show the current concerns of working women.³⁸ The women who were behind the platform wanted to highlight the issue of childcare, understanding many working women were also mothers attempting to pay for it, and there were other women who were trying to work but were unable to because they did not have care for their children. In 1978, fifty three percent of mothers who had children under eighteen were part of the labor force, and 5.9 million of the mothers who were working in 1978 had children that were under the age of six.³⁹ This became a women's issue since more and more mothers were starting work to be able to provide for their families, and the ideal domestic stay-at-home mother was becoming increasingly unattainable.

An alternative work schedule was something that the women wanted to include within the platform. They wanted to encourage flexible work schedules, compressed workweek, and job sharing.⁴⁰ They wanted to do all of these things to be able to make it easier for women to be able to balance holding their jobs and raising their families. In 1978 only six percent of the workforce was able to take advantage of flexible work hours. The unions did not always support changeable hours, condensed workweeks, and sharing jobs. Working longer days in order to work a shorter

³⁸ "Working Women's 1980 platform", *Labor Today* October 1980, 7. in Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 497.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 500.

week is directly against the manageable 8 hour work days that the unions originally fought for, so the gains of working shorter weeks needs to be evaluated against the risks of long days and the lessening of overtime clauses.⁴¹

The Working Women's 1980 Platform also touches on other aspects of these women. One of these concerns was the recognition of women in the work place in general. By 1979, fifty two percent of women were working outside of the home for economic need because they were usually single, widowed, divorced or separated from their husbands.⁴² Women needed to be able to work because a husband was not here to support them. Many of them found work but when they did, they struggled to be recognized and to maintain the lifestyle they had when a husband was contributing to the family's income. This platform raised the concerns of the working women who needed to have validation within their workplace and struggled to balance their lives between their family and work. Each type of jobs had their own specific needs that had to be addressed to make the workplace run smoothly, but they all had the same underlying issues to deal with.

⁴¹ Yates, *Why Unions Matter*, 165.

⁴² Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 497.

Chapter 4

Women in the Mills

The mills were one place that women had many issues working in, and were not easily accepted. There were some who were in the mills, but were treated much worse by their fellow workers than women who held traditionally feminine jobs. Once again, women were thought of as too delicate to be able to perform certain work and unable to handle the same amount of hours as men, and that the economic independence of women was equated with sexual independence that would ruin families and the reputations of the women.⁴³ The way that society thought about women limited their abilities to join the workforce and stay there. The stigma that was attributed to those who worked the non-traditional jobs outside of the home in that era is one that still haunts some modern working women.

In April 1974, the place of women within the mills began to change. They had worked in these mills during the wars, but were replaced by the men when the war was over. The signing of a “Consent Decree” revolutionized the mills workforce. The decree was signed by nine of the nation’s leading steel companies to settle a lawsuit that was filed by the Equal Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Labor Department.⁴⁴ The Decree forced these companies and the union to fill half of the job openings and twenty-five percent of the vacancies in supervisor positions with women.⁴⁵ Since they were being hired at a greater

⁴³ Slavishak, *Bodies of Work*, 202.

⁴⁴ Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

rate, women had access to different positions and promotions. This decree was an effort to end discrimination against women and forced the steel companies to raise the number of women in the steel mills to the same proportion of women in the regional work force.⁴⁶

As they began to work in the mills, women were met with varying reactions from men. Some men thought that women should not be in the mill and that they needed to go back and work in their home and not in a “man’s job” since they would not be able to do the work or the lifting that is required. Many became overly helpful when it came to the women working, as there were reports that if the women was pretty, men attempted to help perform the job, but if she did not “look so good”, she had to hold her own.⁴⁷ Some men who did not agree with women being in the mill mentioned reasons based on the way that our society is set up. They claimed the jobs needed to go to the heads of households as a priority because the society is based on providing for families, while others refuted that argument by saying that women deserved the same right to the jobs as men do since many of the women were the primary caregivers of their families.⁴⁸ Many women had to support their families, and to do that they needed work. If the only jobs they were able to find were in the mills, they had a right to work those jobs and not deal with the men claiming they did not belong.

Many women felt that they were being discriminated against and claimed they were treated unfairly while working at the mills. They were passed over for job advancements, training, and assignments making it impossible for them to work their way up the promotional

⁴⁶ Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came*, 146.

⁴⁷ Mary Margaret Fonow, *Union Women: Forging Feminism in the United Steelworkers of America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

ladders.⁴⁹ These women had to continuously prove themselves while they were working in order to keep their jobs while attempting to keep the comments from their male counterparts to a minimum. Many did not like to use the word discrimination because they felt that it was too political, and felt that it was “un-American that if it happened it must be the fault of the individual.”⁵⁰ They did not see the discrimination that was happening as something to be fought against. The society these women lived in taught them there was a place for men and women, and the women who took jobs in “men’s work” were challenging the status quo. The men who fought against women in the mills felt they had a right to discriminate because they were not in their socially acceptable positions. This proved to be problematic because members of both sides did not know how to deal with it.

Definitions

Cheater Bar: “macho term” for

Pipe used to slide over wrenches to obtain stronger leverage.

she didn’t like the name

*reclaimed it
PIPE: a conduit for power*

simple effective persistent

like a female

The women in the mills were also forced to deal with the terminology that was given by the men to the equipment used.⁵¹ Some names were derogatory as shown in the anecdote reprinted at left; from *Overtime Punching Out with the ‘Mill Hunk Herald’*. The parody “Definitions” reveals how basic terms for equipment had been gendered in respect to those who used it. The cheater bar was claimed a “macho term” like the men who were in the factories handling it. The terms used were at times extremely derogatory and offensive to the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁵¹ “Definitions, “Mill Hunk Herold” Summer 1988. Reproduced in *Overtime: Punchin’ Out With the Mill Hunk Herald* (Homestead: Piece of the Hunk Publishers Inc, 1990), 166.

women who would also have to use these tools and names. These labels showed that women were still not equal within the workforce and men still believed that they should not be there. There were times when women took a stand against the names and “reclaimed” them as the poem states. Sue Doro who was a machinist in Milwaukee wrote the poem and it is clear that she was unhappy with how the names of the machines they used portrayed women as weak.⁵² Having tools and machines with names like a “Cheater Bar” showed the attitudes the men held about women. Renaming something a pipe, like the poem says, depicts power and strength. Calling the tool a cheater bar emasculates the user by insinuating that they are not strong enough to use the regular tools, and need help.

By the poem originally coming from Milwaukee, it shows that this was not only a local Pittsburgh issue. This was a common problem of women who working in the jobs that were usually dominated by men. With women renaming tools, they were taking charge and making a statement on how they were not going to accept this kind of hegemonic relationship with their co-workers. The men who worked in the mills and factories felt they were above the women and displayed that with the names used daily. Sue Doro shows that women were not going to stand for this and by women renaming tools to give off a more positive connotation, they did just that. As the poem says, they renamed the “Cheater bar” to be something that was “Simple, effective, persistent, like a female.”⁵³

⁵² Ibid., 166.

⁵³ Ibid., 166.

Chapter 5

Pittsburgh Women

When looking into the lives of mill workers, Pittsburgh is the perfect place to go. Many steel mills dominated the area that employed an incredible amount local people. The lives of those who lived there revolved around keeping the mills running seven days a week. It was guaranteed that almost every family had a connection to the mills and was proud to be a worker.

The Second World War put Pittsburgh on the map. During the war, America was able to produce as much steel in a year as Germany was able to in three years, and Japan in nine, something that Pittsburgh was crucial to achieving.⁵⁴ The war completely revitalized the city, especially the town of Homestead, which had been entirely upended. The federal government gave orders for Homestead Works to be expanded to take over a fourth of the surrounding area, tearing down 1,262 buildings in the process. This was done for the most part without protest from the residents, and five new complexes were then built, Open Hearth 5 or O.H. 5 with eleven furnaces, a 45-inch slab mill, a 160-inch plate mill, a machine shop and a forging and heat-treating shop. The area that was expanded into was located below the railroad tracks, and was known by those who lived there as the “Ward”.⁵⁵

Before the war, women were expected to “stay in your place and out of the way.”⁵⁶ The husbands of these women did not want them to work. In some cases, women were

⁵⁴ William Serrin, *Homestead* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 222.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 218-220.

⁵⁶ Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 75.

unable to work because their husband ruled that it was not a women's place to earn money.

Women began working in these mills when they became short handed during the war, but they were designated to certain jobs specifically. Many women were put on the "tin lines" because they had a talent for sorting tin as a result of their patience, sharp eyesight, and attention to detail.⁵⁷ This idea that women were able to pick out detail better and have more patience is something that came from the gender roles that were put on women by society. Women took care of the family and had to keep the house perfect and presentable so as a result, they were thought to have more patience and the attention to detail that was needed to work the specific lines in the mill. Beyond that, the men did not want to acknowledge the women as workers and would not let them into the rest of the mill.

On 23 January 1943 a presentation at Duquesne Works was given on "Supervising the Working Women", which included reminders that continued to convey to women that men were of a greater standing and that women are only suitable for a few jobs.⁵⁸ These reminders were things such as "Women's [sic] thigh bones incline inwardly toward her knees" and because of this she is "more susceptible to tripping than a man" or they "admire men because they realize nature favors them" and that "Women are naturally clean as compared with men. There is no job a woman will attack with so much enthusiasm as she will cleaning up."⁵⁹ These were the views that were inherently sexist and were used to keep women out of the mill and out of the work force in general. This presentation is just one example of the views of a mill in Pittsburgh. Women were faced with these reactions throughout the country in every mill they attempted to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

find work in.

Within the unions, very few women were able to make themselves known for their work. Michelle McMills was one of the rare women who was able to make a mark within her union history for her work in the Steel Workers Union Local 1397. McMills began working in the mill in Homestead as a motor inspector in the forge division in October of 1974 after she graduated from Denison University and became a law student at the University of Pittsburgh.⁶⁰ Two years after she began working in the mills, she ran for the position of local union trustee where she had no problem winning the spot because the men enjoyed her attitude.⁶¹

One of McMills' biggest influences on the union was the creation of the *1397 Rank and File* newspaper. According to Mike Stout, a fellow union brother who worked closely with her on the paper claimed they needed something that "unites people from different sections of the mill, and give a voice to the people down at the bottom."⁶² The paper was meant to bring everyone who worked at the Homestead mill together to be able to take back their union, and fight for better conditions. McMills was able to do this with the help of Ron Weisen and John Ingersoll. When the three of them were elected to attend the unions national convention as delegates, they sparingly used the money they were given while there and used the remaining to kick-start the paper.⁶³

The first paper that was issued in January of 1977 was dedicated to the "members who can't find their grievance men, who can't be heard at the union meetings because they are 'out of order,' who have things to say about the local mill conditions" and asked that the members join

⁶⁰ Serrin, *Homestead*, 337.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 337.

⁶² Interview with Mike Stout, March 4 2005. Transcript provided by Mike Stout to author June 27, 2015, 3.

⁶³ Serrin, *Homestead*, 337.

them “to build a strong and democratic union that represents all of us and not just a few.”⁶⁴

McMills was incredibly passionate about the paper; and she saw the importance of it and the message that she was sending to the rest of the members of her union. Mike Stout says, in a personal interview, that McMills wrote most of the articles published in the paper and if she did not, she was the one who edited them before they were printed.⁶⁵ The first three issues in 1977 were released after the newest contract was signed and was the first time most of the union members saw their contract. The paper gave them the ability to be able to read comments about different parts of the agreement.⁶⁶

The *1397 Rank and File* covered everything that was happening in the mill, and because of McMills, everyone was able to have a voice to make their issues known about the union and management. Mike Stout reminisced about the paper, “as long as it was true and you could prove it was true, you could call them whatever you wanted.”⁶⁷ The paper included cartoons mocking the foremen and the administration, and also a section where a contest was held to match the foreman with their nickname.⁶⁸ McMills’ work on the paper was critical for getting her union back on track and working how it should be.

McMills also did other work within the union and mill itself. She was part of the creators of the Women’s Committee in 1979, which was important to help women who were working in this male dominated environment. Between 1976 and 1979, almost 500 women were hired at the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 337.

⁶⁵ Mike Stout, 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

Homestead mill that needed to have an organized fighting force for their work.⁶⁹

After running the paper for many years, and creating invaluable connections for her union, McMills resigned in 1981 after differences with those in charge.⁷⁰ Soon she also lost her job in the major layoffs that were plaguing the area at the time.⁷¹ After her work was done at the mill, McMills went back to law school and stayed in Homestead, even though she lost touch with many of the people that she worked with in the unions.⁷² Even after all of the work that she did and the amount of lives that she was able to change for the better by being an activist within her union, she still felt she did not do enough. She is quoted as saying “I don’t think that we accomplished much... We were never able to effectively challenge the company...there was no political message.”⁷³ Sadly, she took her life at the end of 2004.⁷⁴ Even though she felt she changed nothing in the world, many women were able to work in the mills without such harsh conditions that were once there, and she worked to make Pittsburgh a better place.

While McMills focused on the union problems in general, Steffi Domike was more concerned with women who worked in USX Clairton Works with her. Domike was one of the many women who took advantage of the passing of the Consent Decree when she left Oregon for Pittsburgh in 1976 after earning an economics degree from Reed College.⁷⁵ She took a job as a

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁰ Serrin, *Homestead*, 358.

⁷¹ “Obituary: Michele McMills / Steelworker who became activist,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, last modified December 3, 2004, <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/obituaries/2004/12/03/Obituary-Michele-McMills-Steelworker-who-became-activist/stories/200412030303>.

⁷² Serrin, *Homestead*, 399.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 399.

⁷⁴ “Obituary: Michelle McMills,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*.

⁷⁵ Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 82.

janitor for the Clairton mill when she immediately noticed that the separation of workers by race, and sex was still extremely prevalent. Domike describes how the African Americans were doing the jobs that had the greatest health hazards and required the greatest amount of physical labor, but also how the majority of Italians were bricklayers and the Polish worked with the tin. This reality of the segregation of workers illustrates the intersections of race, gender and social class in the contemporary labor movement not only in the mills of Pittsburgh but around the country. After nine months as a janitor, Domike worked as an electrician's apprentice for five years before she fell victim to the mass layoffs that happened in the early 1980s, giving her a reason to get involved with the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee, food banks, and community involvement to save the mills.⁷⁶

One of Domike's biggest contributions to the women who worked in the mills was the creation of the activist group named "Women of Steel" which published the *Women of Steel Newsletter* which addressed women's issues in the mills in the surrounding areas.⁷⁷ While it was not as bold in attacking management as the *1397 Rank and File* was, the newsletter still was crucial in making women's issues known. The main thing that the *Women of Steel Newsletter* did was show women who were at the other mills that they were not alone with the issues that they were dealing with. Many other women who were working at mills in the surrounding area had the same grievances, and the newsletter allowed them to stand together for their rights as workers.

This newsletter touched on almost every issue the women who worked in the mills had, from discriminatory testing to pregnancy to harassment. The section of the newsletter called

⁷⁶ Ibid., 83-84.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 83.

Local Notes is where women could submit their experiences to be printed. In the first issue, the discriminatory testing was brought to light. At Irvin Works, women in Local 2227 who were transferring into the “Pickle House” were given a test that the men who were working there were not required to do, which was to lift a 75 pound bucket.⁷⁸ This test was to prove that women were incapable of working in this area because they were not physically able to do the work that was needed. Women went through the process of grieving the testing of only women to get it dropped, which it eventually was.⁷⁹ This type of testing was something that happened often in an effort to keep women out of certain parts of the mills.

Pregnancy discrimination was also something that women had to deal with in the mills. The newsletter worked to make sure the women who were pregnant knew that they had rights and the company was not allowed to take certain actions against them. A new maternity law was put into effect on 29 April 1979, that forced companies to treat women who were pregnant in a certain way.⁸⁰ Companies had to provide the same benefits to women who were pregnant as they would disabled workers, provide medical benefits to cover the costs of childbirth the same way they do for other medical conditions that are covered, stop forcing women to stop work if they were able to continue, stop setting time limits for women to return to work, credit women with the seniority after pregnancy leave like they would employees who missed work for other disabilities, and stop refusing to hire or promote women who were pregnant.⁸¹

⁷⁸ “Local Notes: Irvin Works- Local 2227.” *Women of Steel*, March 1979, 2. The *Women of Steel* newsletter can be located in the Tri-State Conference on Manufacturing Records, 1982-1993, AIS.1993.10, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁰ “Pregnant? You’ve Got Rights Too!” *Women of Steel*, May 1979, 7.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

One of the biggest issues that the newsletter discussed was the unequal access to restrooms and locker rooms that women had compared to men. In all of the issues this topic is brought up in the local notes about women who have complained to their bosses, unions, and companies about the conditions they have to deal with and rarely anything was done. In the third issue, in the local notes, a woman from Irvin Works Local 2227 complains that there are 500 women using three different locker rooms, where one has 30 lockers used by 60 women with only one bench and two toilets (with one of them not working) and fungus in the showers.⁸² This report was not as bad compared to others. Some had to walk miles, and Steffi Domike explains that at Clairton men were still assigned to cleaning the bathroom and would go inside and lock the doors leaving women without anywhere to go.⁸³

Since these areas for women were so spread out, at times it was not safe to walk the length of the mill to be able to get where they need to be. The newsletter highlights the story of Dee Matus who was attacked by a man on 26 August 1979, while she was going to the women's comfort station during her shift at 2am, when a man reportedly hit her with a blunt object, knocking her out and resulted in a concussion and contusions of her head and neck.⁸⁴ Events like this shows that the mills did not have enough security for their workers to be able to safely go from one end of the mill to the other, and that they needed to add more locker room areas for women in different sections of the mill. At the time the story was published, no compensation was given to Matus for her time off while she was in the hospital recovering.⁸⁵

Women were also not always safe while they were working at the mills. The United Steel

⁸² "Local Notes: Irvin Works- Local 2227." *Women of Steel*, August 1979, 4.

⁸³ Wymard, *Talking Steel Towns*, 83.

⁸⁴ "...Adding Injury to Insult." *Women of Steel*, November 1979, 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

Workers of America Local 1397 created pamphlets that outlined what harassment was, and what could be done about it in an effort to raise awareness of the issue plaguing not only their local but also many others. The pamphlet explained harassment as a person or group of workers being singled out for special abuse by the management personnel, and can take place at any time. Sexual harassment was defined as management making someone believe they will get in trouble or lose their job if they do not put up with sexual advances, remarks, or actions. These were issues that women not only in Pittsburgh were dealing with every day on the job. By creating the pamphlet, Local 1397 was taking a stand against harassment by educating the women on the process that they would be able to follow to create a better workplace. The pamphlet told women that they were to first tell the management person they consider their actions harassment in the presence of a witness, write down all information about the incident and if the harassment continues, report it to the assistant grievor of the union.⁸⁶

If the women did not get the response they needed, the pamphlet also told them how to take more action. If the harassment was sexual or racial they were to report it to the Civil Rights Committee, and if the assistant grievor did not do enough, they were to go to the zone grievor then the head grievor of their union. Sometimes these women did not feel that things that were said or done to them was harassment or they did not want to make waves within the workplace by reporting it and making their job harder. The pamphlet recognizes that this harassment does not always come from the management and can also come from other union members. It advises the women to go to the assistant grievor and not to the company because the union has a specific process of dealing with its own members, and it is better to not let the company see that the

⁸⁶ United Steel Workers of America, "Unite! To Defeat Harassment," n.d. Steffi Domike Papers, 1946-2009, AIS.1997.20, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh, Box 1, Folder 13.

members are fighting amongst themselves.⁸⁷

Once the mills started to shut down and layoffs began, many of the steelworkers began to collect unemployment. This was not an easy task for the people who were forced out of their jobs and in turn unable to find new ones in the limited job market of the area. One single mother was unable to collect welfare to help support herself and her four children because she owned a car, one of the many rules of the system.⁸⁸ Once these women hit a time limit for collecting unemployment, new rules were set into place. For the first 31 weeks, all that was required was that they went to the unemployment office and said they had made an “active search” for work and collected their checks, but after that time was up, they had to submit proof of their job searches.⁸⁹ They had to contact five different employers each week and have a note claiming “no jobs available” to be able to receive their unemployment check.⁹⁰

The unemployment office also required random job searches. Steffi Domike had created a list of employers in alphabetical order to make it easier to contact employers since they were not allowed to contact the same company more than once a month. She was told that using her list was not allowed because it was too systematic and the companies had to be completely random.⁹¹ This requirement of job searching made it nearly impossible for anyone to find jobs within the Steel Valley with its failing economy. So many people were trying to be hired in the few jobs that were left after the mills were closed, and those who did not find employment were being cut off from any help. The system was set up in a way that no one would ever be able to

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hoerr, *And the Wolf Finally Came*, 150.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 150.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 150-151.

⁹¹ Ibid., 151.

benefit from it and made the struggle of families even harder.

Conclusion

Unions originally posed another obstacle for women as they were trying to assimilate into their new jobs. The men who ran the unions did not feel that it was a woman's place to join the workforce and have a job outside of the home. Eventually that began to change as women joined together to make their issues known and fight for a better work environment in general.

The discrimination that was felt by these women was intense and lasting. Many felt that these jobs were no place for women to be, and the many of them were taking jobs away from the hard working men who needed them. Women have been working since the beginning of time, but their work has been in the house and has had economic value. Once that began to change, women started "entering" the workforce and getting jobs in the public social sphere.

In Pittsburgh alone, many women worked in these untraditional jobs and were trailblazers within the steel industry and unions in the area. The women made themselves known and refused to stay silent and be pushed out of the story by men. They played just as big of a part in the history of steel in Pittsburgh as men did. While the industry has almost entirely diminished, the story of these hard working women and the challenges they faced will still live on.

Many questions remain regarding women who worked in the mills, both in Pittsburgh and in other towns in the "rust belt". Race is a major factor in how the workers were treated by administration and also fellow members in the union. The role that race and gender played in the issues that were taken seriously by the unions is some thing that needs to be further researched. The reaction of the women who were forced out of their jobs in factories is also something that needs to be looked into. Some were able to move to other positions, but many were forced out of

work completely.

Understanding the struggles that these women have gone through is key to recognizing the impact they have had on our world today. McMills felt that she did not change the world by her involvement in the union, which is untrue. Her work impacted those around her, even people that she had never met. By fighting for equal rights for everyone, she left the world a better place for those to come, something that unions still fight for today. They want improvement for themselves, but also those who follow.

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